

India's Maritime Security Strategy and Its Significance for the Arabian Gulf States

Dr. Ashraf Mohammed Keshk
Director of the Strategic and International Studies
Program



Introduction

While international security partnerships between small and medium-sized states and major powers remain important, regional security organizations continue to play a significant role, as they are rooted in shared history, geography, and vital interests. Regional security also represents an important intermediate level between global and national security. Maritime security constitutes a key area of regional cooperation, given the pivotal role of seas and oceans in international trade, including in the Indian Ocean. India is one of the key actors in this region. Accordingly, this paper seeks to analyze India's maritime security strategy and its significance for the Arabian Gulf States by examining the main elements of this strategy, the existing frameworks for cooperation between India and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in the field of maritime security, and the challenges facing such cooperation.

A Brief History of Trade in the Indian Ocean

Compared to other oceans, the Indian Ocean is vast, encompassing numerous coastal countries. Some of the oldest civilizations emerged along its coasts and bays, excluding ancient Egypt. The Indian Ocean has been known to sailors for thousands of years, unlike other oceans, which remained unknown for much longer. The diverse productive activities of the countries bordering the Indian Ocean influenced commercial activity. Notably, the region was not a competitive arena among states; rather, it focused primarily on trade. Arab, Persian, Chinese, Indian, and African traders collaborated peacefully. The flourishing trade in the region gave rise to legends in Europe about the sources of its goods, with some suggesting that they came from paradise or from lands guarded by snakes, until geographical discoveries revealed their places of production. The Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta noted that Arabs in Indian coastal regions held significant positions, and Arab trade extended across most parts of the Indian subcontinent, particularly during the period of Islamic rule. Indian ports were not the endpoint of Islamic trade but rather gateways to other ports, including those in China. Additionally, India emerged as a maritime power due to its strong and diverse economy, exporting shipbuilding timber, raw iron, and swords, while importing incense, horses, and dates.

Arab voyages to China were seasonal, depending on weather conditions. In contrast, voyages to India could take place year-round from the Arabian coast, with traders making two or more trips per year from Oman and the Arabian Gulf. Generally, the prosperity of Indian Ocean

ports resulted from the region's wealth and Western demand for its goods. The main route for these goods to reach Europe was through the Indian Ocean and then via the Arabian Gulf or the Red Sea. Trading activity was highly active compared with, for example, that in the Mediterranean. In addition to India's strategic location along commercial routes, policies promoting the fair treatment of merchants contributed to its prosperity. The ocean was named after India, whose civilization remains one of the oldest among the states bordering the Indian Ocean¹.

India's Maritime Security Strategy

When examining any strategy, three key elements are crucial: the strategy's content, the timing of its launch, and its impact and implementation.

Content: In 2015, India announced its maritime strategy, encompassing various interests, including the protection of trade and energy supplies. It highlighted nine key maritime chokepoints, three of which are directly tied to the maritime security of the Arabian Gulf: (1) Strait of Hormuz: India's strategy states that "any closure of this strait will severely impact energy security for many countries, including India." (2) Bab al-Mandeb: The strategy notes, "Any closure of Bab al-Mandeb will isolate the countries bordering the Red Sea from the Arabian Sea and Asia, blocking access to the Suez Canal, thereby necessitating a significant increase in shipping and tanker capacities through alternative international waterways to maintain oil and trade flow." (3) Suez Canal: According to the strategy, "closure of the canal would reroute traffic around the Cape of Good Hope, increasing transit time and transport costs. For example, the distance between Mumbai and London is 6,200 nautical miles via the Suez Canal, and approximately 10,800 nautical miles via the Cape of Good Hope."¹

The strategy identifies seven primary regions and five secondary ones. Among the primary areas of concern for India's maritime security are three that are crucial to the Arabian Gulf: the Arabian Sea, the Arabian Gulf and its coasts, and the Red Sea and its shores. The strategy also considers potential threats, including maritime terrorism and piracy, both of which pose challenges to Arabian Gulf security. To protect its maritime security, India aims to enhance comprehensive maritime security in the designated areas through cooperation with friendly

¹ Shawqi Abdul-Qawi Othman. No date. *Indian Ocean Trade in the Era of Islamic Dominance: 661-904 AH / 1263-1498 AD*. Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters.

naval forces. This cooperation might include providing support to other maritime states upon request and involves security operations such as monitoring and patrolling exclusive economic zones, coordinated patrols, anti-piracy measures, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, non-combatant evacuations, maritime interception, peace support, and search-and-rescue operations.²

Timing: Although strategies are responses to perceived threats that require comprehensive plans, the timing of a strategy's announcement cannot be separated from the policies of certain regional and international powers, which have influenced India's vision for maritime security in the Indian Ocean. This area is part of a competitive arena for these powers. Regionally, China has recognized the significance of the maritime domain within the broader security framework of the Indian Ocean by securing maritime communication lines through two mechanisms: (1) strengthening diplomatic ties with India's neighbors in South Asia, such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, through trade relations; and (2) limiting Indian and American influence in the Indian Ocean through the "String of Pearls" strategy in the Pacific region.

Globally, the most significant development was the U.S. "Pivot to Asia" policy, announced by President Barack Obama in 2012 to counter China's growing influence through close ties with regional allies, including India. The U.S. demonstrated its commitment to India through three indicators:

1. The official acknowledgment by the U.S. administration during the Barack Obama presidency of India's strategic location, referring to India as the preferred partner in addressing shared security challenges.
2. The strategic partnership agreement with India, which enhanced India's maritime capabilities through the sale of Apache maritime helicopters.
3. The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), initially established in 2007, which includes the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, to boost military cooperation and joint exercises among these countries.²

² Sen, Anirban. 2023. India's Role in the Indian Ocean Region and Its Links to the Indo-Pacific. May 9. Accessed November 2, 2024. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/09735984231164457>.

Impact and Implementation: Since the Indian Ocean is a lifeline for India, facilitating 95% of its trade and 80% of its crude oil imports, India has pursued a comprehensive maritime security strategy encompassing economic, military, and security dimensions. In March 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated, “India aspires to a future for the Indian Ocean that aligns with the name Sagar (Ocean) by fostering a climate of trust, transparency, adherence to maritime navigation rules, peaceful dispute resolution, and increased cooperation in navigation.”

Regionally, India firmly supports the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), comprising 25 countries and aiming to enhance naval cooperation among Indian Ocean coastal states. India is also a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which includes 12 countries and seeks to promote cooperation on maritime security issues. India’s navy is classified as a blue-water navy, capable of operating far from its shores, with a robust fleet of aircraft carriers and a triad of nuclear capabilities. India plans to expand its navy from the current 132 ships, 220 aircraft, and 15 submarines to 200 ships, 500 aircraft, and 24 attack submarines by 2027.³

The Indian Navy played a vital role during crises in neighboring Gulf countries. In 2015, more than 26 countries, including the U.S., requested India’s assistance in evacuating their nationals amid the Yemen conflict, during which six Indian warships rescued 4,000 Indians and 1,200 foreigners before the bombing of Aden port. In 2020 and 2021, Indian ships sailed 40,000 miles to deliver food, medicines, and weapons to countries in the Indian Ocean.⁴

India has also combated maritime security threats in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. Although India did not join the U.S.-led “Prosperity Guardian” coalition for maritime security in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb, which was established in 2023, its navy inspected more

³ Ann Janardan. 2020. "The Impact of Cooperation and Competition in the Indian Ocean Region on the Security of the Arabian Gulf." *Derasat*, 136-137.

⁴ Adel Ali. 2024. "Balancing China: The Motivations Behind the Increasing Overseas Deployment of India's Naval Power." April 8. Accessed November 6, 2024.

<https://futureuae.com/ar-AE/Mainpage/Item/9154/%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9-%D8%AA%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B>

than 250 vessels near the Red Sea. India maintains two warships in the Gulf of Aden and at least ten in the northern and western Arabian Sea, along with reconnaissance aircraft.⁵

On February 3, 2024, India launched INS Sandhayak, its first large survey ship, aimed at conducting comprehensive surveys of ports, harbors, navigation routes, coastal areas, and deep-sea regions in the Indian Ocean to bolster maritime safety. According to Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, "India's growing naval power aims to ensure a rules-based global order." He added, "Our goal is to halt illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific and combat drug trafficking and human trafficking in this region. Our commitment extends beyond piracy to securing peace and prosperity across the entire region."⁶

Arabian Gulf States' Strategy for Maritime Security Protection

The Arabian Gulf states are classified as maritime nations based on the six criteria defined by U.S. Navy officer Alfred Mahan: a nation's geographic location, coastal characteristics, coastal hinterland, country size and population, national characteristics, and the government's orientation. As such, the Arabian Gulf states have faced various maritime security threats throughout their history, such as those experienced during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), when Iran threatened to close or disrupt navigation through the Strait of Hormuz; attacks on oil tankers in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman in 2019 and 2021; Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz in 2026; piracy; maritime terrorism; and smuggling operations. GCC countries share some of these threats with India. GCC countries have adopted three approaches to maintaining maritime security:

⁵ Russian News Agency. 2024. "India Deploys an Unprecedented Naval Force Near the Red Sea." February 1. Accessed November 6, 2024.

<https://arabic.rt.com/world/1534616-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A9>

⁶ Shadi Abdel Sater. 2024. "India Expands Its Naval Capabilities to Enhance Its International Presence and Seek Balance with China." February 5. Accessed November 9, 2024.

<https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85/%D8%A2%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7/4835636-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%91%D8%B9-%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B2>

1. **Enhancing National Naval Capabilities:** Each state has focused on strengthening its naval capabilities. Additionally, GCC countries have increased regional cooperation, including the establishment of the Joint Maritime Task Force 81 within the Peninsula Shield Forces in 2014 and the Unified Maritime Operations Center in 2016, which coordinates with relevant maritime navigation bodies and organizations. GCC countries also conduct regular naval exercises, both among themselves and with regional and international powers.
2. **Participation in Regional Organizations for Maritime Security:** These include the revised Code of Conduct concerning the Repression of Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden, established in 2009. The Code was initially signed by 17 countries and expanded to 21 after Eritrea, Mozambique, Mauritius, and the UAE joined. Oman, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Yemen are parties to the Code, with Bahrain joining in March 2024. The Code operates under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Another regional organization is the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, established in 2020 as a Saudi-led initiative comprising eight countries, including Yemen, with the aim of “ensuring maritime security in the Red Sea.”
3. **Participation in U.S.-Led Maritime Coalitions for Regional Security:** GCC countries have joined U.S.-led maritime coalitions designed to protect regional navigation, including:
 - The 2019 International Maritime Security Construct (CTF Sentinel), led by the U.S., with six member states, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE.
 - The “Prosperity Guardian” coalition (2023), focusing on Red Sea navigation security following Houthi attacks, with Bahrain being the only member in the region.

- The European Union's maritime surveillance mission in the Strait of Hormuz, led by France and supported by eight European countries, has been based in the UAE since 2020.⁷
- The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's announcement on 30 July 2026 of the establishment of a multinational defensive maritime coalition aimed at enhancing and protecting the security of international waterways and countering threats to maritime navigation and global trade in the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden.⁸

Indicators of GCC-India Cooperation in Maritime Security

Given the strategic importance of maritime security to each of the GCC countries, there are several indicators of cooperation, including visits by Indian naval vessels to the Arabian Gulf during the period 2013–2025, as illustrated in the following table:

Visits by Indian Naval Ships to the Arabian Gulf States (2013-2025)

Year	GCC countries visited
2013	Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Oman
2015	UAE, Bahrain, KSA, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman
2016	UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman
2017	UAE, Oman, KSA
2018	UAE, Oman, KSA, Qatar
2019	Qatar
2020	UAE, Oman, KSA, Qatar
2021	Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, KSA, Qatar
2022	Qatar, Oman, KSA, Kuwait
2023	Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, Oman, KSA
2024	Bahrain, UAE, Oman, KSA
2025	Bahrain, KSA, UAE, Kuwait

⁷ Ashraf Mohammed Keshk. 2022. *Maritime Security of the Arabian Gulf States*. Manama: Bahrain Center for Strategic, International, and Energy Studies "Derasat"

⁸ Ashraf Mohammed Abdulhamid Keshk, "The Strategic Implications of the Saudi Initiative to Establish a Defensive Maritime Coalition for Maritime Security," Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies (Derasat), August 3, 2026, Derasat.

Source: Adapted from Abhijit Singh's study, "India's Evolving Maritime Role in the Indian Ocean: Opportunities for the Gulf," based on the annual reports of India's Ministry of Defense (2013–2025).

From 2013 to 2025, Indian naval ships visited the Arabian Gulf States 48 times, with Kuwait receiving seven visits, Qatar eight, the UAE nine, Oman ten, Saudi Arabia nine, and Bahrain five. These visits reflect India's interest in developing maritime relations with GCC countries.

Maritime Security Agreements Between India and Some Gulf States:

In 2016, India and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement to enhance maritime security in the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. In 2017, India and the UAE signed a strategic partnership agreement that included maritime security cooperation. India also signed memoranda of understanding with Bahrain and Qatar on maritime security, covering Indian naval ship visits and joint exercises. Oman and India signed a logistical agreement in 2018 granting the Indian Navy access to Duqm Port, one of Oman's strategic ports. In 2019, India deployed a P-81 long-range maritime patrol aircraft for anti-piracy operations from Salalah, Oman, conducting patrols in the Gulf of Aden. In May 2020, the Indian Navy conducted one of its largest evacuations of migrant workers from various regions, including the Arabian Gulf.⁹

Joint Naval Exercises between Indian and GCC Navies:

The first bilateral naval exercises between the Indian and Qatari navies were conducted from November 17–22, 2019, in Qatar. The Indian Navy also conducted exercises in Oman from March 12–26 and October 20–24, 2019, and conducted exercises with GCC navies from January 7 to October 10, 2020. The first bilateral exercises between the Indian and Saudi

⁹ Abhijit Singh. 2020. "The Development of India's Maritime Posture in the Indian Ocean: Opportunities for the Gulf Region." August. Accessed November 3, 2024. <https://www.agda.ac.ae/docs/default-source/Publications/eda-insight-aug-2020-arb-abhijit.pdf>

navies were held from August 12–14, 2021. The Indian Navy also conducted bilateral exercises with the UAE and Qatari navies from August 12–14, 2021.¹⁰

In general, the Indian Navy plays an important role in safeguarding maritime navigation in the Arabian Gulf and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. This was highlighted by Vinod K. Jacob, Ambassador of the Republic of India to the Kingdom of Bahrain, in an interview with the Bahraini newspaper *Al Ayam* on July 17, 2026. He emphasized that “India and Bahrain are in complete agreement on the importance of ensuring freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, given its vital role as an artery for global trade and energy security.” He also highlighted the following points¹¹:

- India joined the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), headquartered in Bahrain, as an Associate Partner in 2022 before becoming a full member in 2023.
- On February 11, 2026, the Indian Navy assumed command of Combined Task Force 154 (CTF 154), the CMF’s training task force. This marked the first time India had assumed command of one of the task forces within the multinational maritime partnership. During its command, India focused on capacity-building, enhancing interoperability, and strengthening the readiness of partner nations. Fourteen training courses were organized across several areas, providing participants with more than 2,200 hours of training. In addition, Operation Compass Rose 26-1 was conducted virtually from April 20–22, 2026, with 137 participants from 25 partner nations.
- The Indian city of Kochi hosted Southern Readiness 26-2, conducted by CTF 154 from July 20–23, 2026. The four-day program included both theoretical and practical training, drawing on the Indian Navy’s advanced training infrastructure.

India–GCC Joint Mechanisms for Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean

¹⁰ Defense, Indian Ministry of. n.d. Annual Reports. Accessed November 4, 2024. <https://mod.gov.in/annual-report>.

¹¹ Tamam Abu Safi, “Indian Ambassador: Bahrain and India Agree on Protecting Freedom of Navigation,” *Al Ayam*, July 17, 2026, <https://www.alayam.com/alayam/first/1139347/News.html>.

Due to the Indian Ocean's strategic importance to international trade, coastal states have established regional organizations to enhance cooperation, including in the field of maritime security. These include:

Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) 1997:

To understand the rationale behind IORA, one can refer to the theory of regional security complexes, particularly in the period following World War II, when the global system witnessed two trends: decentralization and regionalization. Decentralization meant that Western nations no longer monopolized global influence, while regionalization saw countries adopting more flexible foreign policies. As military and security issues gave way to economic, environmental, social, and energy concerns, theorists such as Joseph Nye highlighted the importance of geographical and interdependence factors in regional security. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, pioneers of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, defined the concept of a "Regional Security Complex" as a group of units whose security and non-security processes are interconnected in such a way that it is challenging to analyze or address their security issues independently. Geography plays a pivotal role in these interactions¹², This means that regionalism is a concept that transcends immediate geographical proximity and responds to the changing conception of national interests of states. States' decisions to join regional security organizations can be explained by three motivations: first, the functional necessity of cooperation due to the negative effects of cross-border globalization; second, the need for small and medium-sized states to enhance their bargaining power within multilateral arrangements; and third, the desire to boost economic competitiveness amid growing interdependence in the global economy.¹³

Building on these theoretical foundations, IORA was established in 1997, bringing together 23 member states and ten dialogue partners. The association includes Oman, the UAE, Qatar and Yemen from the Gulf region, alongside Iran from the neighboring region. According to its charter, IORA is grounded in historical ties and economic developments. It operates on

¹² Tziarras, Zenonas. 2018. The Eastern Mediterranean: Between Power Struggles and Regionalist Aspirations. September. Accessed November 3, 2024.

file:///C:/Users/dcrsamk/Downloads/ZTziarrasEastMedBetweenPowerStrugglesandRegionalistAspirations.pdf.

¹³ Ashraf Mohammed Keshk and Mona Saad Al-Resais. 2023. "The Relationship Between the Kingdom of Bahrain and ASEAN: A Model for Interregional Cooperation." *Derasat*, 73.

principles such as sovereign equality, territorial integrity, and non-interference, and membership does not conflict with other alliances. Among its six main areas of cooperation, maritime security is prioritized, with three key focus areas: maritime safety and security, fisheries management, and disaster risk management.¹⁴ Recent priorities now include the blue economy, women's economic empowerment, and sustainable development. Despite successful cooperation based on shared interests, flexibility, partnerships with international actors, and a balance between regional and global interests, challenges remain. The association still faces several challenges, including economic disparities among its members, as both developed and developing countries are represented, which is reflected in their differing priorities. For some countries, priorities may include innovation and maritime transport, while for others, sustainable development and combating illegal fishing may be more pressing.

In addition, political tensions exist between some member states due to issues such as border disputes. Another challenge is funding, as the association's reliance on member states and dialogue partners for financial support makes the implementation of major projects dependent on the availability of such funding. Climate change also poses a challenge, as many of the association's countries are small island states facing the threat of rising sea levels and changing weather patterns that affect fisheries and agriculture. Finally, civil society participation remains weak, as the involvement of non-governmental and educational organizations remains limited, making the association less responsive to the needs of local communities in Indian Ocean countries.¹⁵

Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS):

The symposium includes 25 member countries and nine observer states. Among its member states are India and four GCC countries—Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE—as well as Iran from the neighboring region. This forum is a voluntary initiative aimed at enhancing cooperation among the naval forces of Indian Ocean coastal countries by providing an

¹⁴ 1997. CHARTER OF THE INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION (IORA). Accessed November 3, 2024. https://www.iora.int/sites/default/files/2024-03/iora_charter.pdf.

¹⁵ Ogutu, Moses Onyango. 2021. The Indian Ocean Rim Association: Lessons from this regional cooperation model. April 27. Accessed November 3, 2024. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10220461.2021.1915863>.

inclusive platform for discussing maritime issues relevant to the region. Through a mechanism for information exchange among maritime professionals, it strengthens maritime security.¹⁶ Notably, Saudi Arabia was selected to chair the symposium for the period from 2027 to 2029, with the consensus of the member and observer states during the presidential meeting held in Thailand in 2023.¹⁷

The Importance of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor for GCC-India Maritime Cooperation

During the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September 2023, plans were announced for the establishment of an economic corridor connecting India, the Middle East, and Europe. Without delving into the details of this project, the impact of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor on GCC–Indian cooperation in the maritime sector can be examined in three areas: GCC seaports and their significance to the economies of the GCC countries; development plans, including income diversification away from oil through investment in the blue economy; and maritime transport routes and their importance to GCC trade with the rest of the world.

In terms of seaports: GCC countries are strategically located along global trade routes, which has enhanced the importance of their ports to their economies and created competition among these ports. Key ports include¹⁸:

- **Jebel Ali Port** in northern Dubai, UAE, serving goods from the Indian subcontinent, Africa, and Asia.
- **Sohar Port** in Oman, located outside the Strait of Hormuz, handling approximately five percent of global oil supplies.

¹⁶ n.d. Indian Ocean Naval Symposium'. Accessed November 9, 2024. <https://www.ions.global/>.

¹⁷ Sabq News Website. 2023. "By Unanimous Decision: Defense Ministry - 'The Kingdom' Wins Chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)." December 24. Accessed November 9, 2024.<https://sabq.org/saudia/uyjqf7bynv>.

¹⁸ Al-Khaleej Online. 2021. "With Strategic Locations, Gulf Ports Compete in Size and Activity." September 4. Accessed November 5, 2024. <https://alkhaleejonline.net/-بالحجم-تتنافس-خليجية-موانئ-اقتصاد/مواقعها-استراتيجية> والنشاط.

- **Jeddah Port** in Saudi Arabia, which handles more than 75% of goods entering through Saudi ports.
- **Hamad Port** in Qatar, which aims to capture more than one-third of Middle Eastern trade and includes a marine support station.
- **Shuwaikh Port**, the main port in Kuwait, capable of receiving deep-draft vessels.
- **Khalifa bin Salman Port** in Bahrain, with deep-water berths capable of accommodating the latest generation of large container ships and direct land connections to Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries.

In addition to the aforementioned ports, there are three other important GCC ports whose strategic roles became particularly prominent during the 2026 war, especially in the context of developments beyond the Strait of Hormuz. These ports are:

1. Fujairah Port

Fujairah Port is located on the eastern coast of the United Arab Emirates along the Gulf of Oman. It occupies a strategically important position near the Strait of Hormuz. As a multipurpose port, it serves as a major hub for international trade and constitutes an important link in the trade routes connecting East and West.¹⁹

2. Yanbu Port

Yanbu Port is one of the most important Saudi ports on the Red Sea. During the 2026 war, it played an important role as an alternative outlet for the transportation of oil to the Kingdom's western coast and subsequently to international markets, bypassing the Strait of Hormuz. According to Saudi Energy Minister HRH Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the volume of oil pumped through the East–West Pipeline to Yanbu reached approximately 5.8 million barrels on 6 October 2026.²⁰

¹⁹ AD Ports Group, “Fujairah Terminals,” accessed October 7, 2026, <https://shorturl.at/q400t>.

²⁰ “Energy Minister: Saudi Arabia Restores East–West Pipeline Capacity to 5.8 Million Barrels,” CNN Business Arabic, October 6, 2026, <https://shorturl.at/v7E25>.

3. Salalah Port

Salalah Port plays an important role in the maritime shipping sector of the Sultanate of Oman and occupies a strategically significant location overlooking the Indian Ocean and situated along major international shipping routes. The port receives increasing numbers of vessels and handles substantial volumes of containers. It serves as a pivotal hub for the distribution of transshipment containers between East and West, thereby enhancing its significance in international trade and maritime transportation.²¹

These ports play a central role in GCC trade with the rest of the world, including India. Reports indicate that trade between India and the GCC countries reached \$184 billion in 2022–2023, compared with \$84.4 billion in 2021. Additionally, negotiations are underway between India and the GCC countries to establish a free trade agreement.²²

In terms of the GCC countries' ability to utilize the marine environment, a report issued by the General Secretariat of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 2023, titled “Sustainable Development Goals,” included indicators on the 17 goals established by the United Nations for sustainable development. Among these is Goal 14, titled “Life Below Water: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.” The report indicates the success of GCC countries in leveraging marine resources, with the following percentages: UAE 57.1%, Bahrain 85.7%, Saudi Arabia 71.4%, Oman 71.4%, Qatar 100%, and Kuwait 71.4%. These are important indicators that reflect the GCC countries’ ability to benefit from the marine environment.²³

Regarding income diversification, there is no doubt that enhancing foreign trade with international partners is a key objective for the GCC countries through future projects. One example is the NEOM project in Saudi Arabia, which aims to transform the desert into an

²¹ “Port of Salalah,” Oman Information Portal, Sultanate of Oman, <https://www.omaninfo.om/mainsections/130/show/280>.

²² Emirates Policy Center. 2023. “Complementary Competition: The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative.” October 4. Accessed November 5, 2024. <https://epc.ae/ar/details/scenario/altanafus-altakamuli-mamar-alhind-alsharq-alawsat-uwruba-wamubadarat-alhizam-waltariq>.

²³ Gulf Cooperation Council Website. 2023. “Statistical Center, Brief Report on the Sustainable Development Goals for Gulf Arab States.” May. Accessed November 5, 2024. https://gccstat.org/images/gccstat/docman/publications/___arabic_final.pdf.

innovative, futuristic city in the west of the Kingdom, powered entirely by renewable energy and providing investment opportunities for many countries, including India. India relies on Saudi Arabia for 18% of its oil needs and has 2.5 million Indian workers in the Kingdom, whose financial remittances are estimated at around \$8 billion annually.²⁴

In terms of the GCC countries' reliance on maritime passages for their trade with the outside world, they primarily depend on the Strait of Hormuz, which is the only link between the Arabian Gulf and the open waters of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It is the sole maritime outlet for Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. Other GCC countries also rely on the strait but have additional ports outside it. Approximately 17 million barrels of oil pass through the strait daily, equivalent to 20% of the world's total oil supply. Another critical passage is the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. This strait serves as a major maritime corridor for trade, especially oil, from the Arabian Gulf region and Iran, with approximately 57,000 containers passing through it daily, accounting for 10% of global trade.²⁵ Thus, the Iranian threat to these two straits affects the vital interests of the GCC countries, which rely on these maritime passages for their global trade.

An example of this reliance is the decision by Saudi Oil Minister Khalid Al-Falih on July 26, 2018, to "suspend all crude oil shipments through the Bab al-Mandab Strait immediately and temporarily... until safe navigation is ensured." This decision followed an attack by the Houthis in the Red Sea on two giant oil tankers owned by the Saudi national company "Bahri," each carrying two million barrels of crude oil. One of the tankers sustained "minor damage without any injuries."²⁶ Notably, Saudi Arabia resumed exports through this strait on August 4, 2018, with oil exports through the Bab al-Mandab Strait ranging from 500,000 to 700,000 barrels per day. In addition to the current Iranian threats facing the Straits of Hormuz and

²⁴ Mustafa Saij. 2023. "The Corridor Grants Saudi Arabia the Position of Strategic Balance Holder with One Hand and the Weight Stone in the Other." *Araa Hawl Al-Khaleej*, 23-24.

²⁵ Ashraf Mohammed Kashk. 2022. *Maritime Security of the Arabian Gulf States*. Manama: Bahrain Center for Strategic, International, and Energy Studies "Derasat".

²⁶ Agence France-Presse Website. 2018. "Saudi Arabia Announces Suspension of Oil Exports Through the Bab al-Mandab Strait Following Houthi Attack." July 28. Accessed November 9, 2024. <https://www.france24.com/ar/20180726-المنذوب-باب-الصادرات-تعليق-السعودية-اليمن>.

Bab al-Mandab, these developments highlight the vulnerability of the GCC countries' maritime trade routes.

Based on these factors, any maritime projects or initiatives are highly significant to the GCC countries, given their strategic location as coastal nations. The proposed corridor, for example, will connect India to several Middle Eastern countries, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal stated on September 6, 2024, that this corridor “will integrate major global regions, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia... to foster a more interconnected trade environment.” He added that “the corridor will reduce logistics costs, improve the security of goods movement, and establish more controlled and monitored maritime routes, which is essential for mitigating piracy and other maritime threats, along with other benefits. It will also strengthen India’s maritime security framework, reducing reliance on traditional maritime routes that are prone to geopolitical tensions...”²⁷

HRH Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister, stated during his meeting with Narendra Modi, the Indian Prime Minister, at the Strategic Partnership Council meetings between the two countries that “relations with India are mutually beneficial, and we are working on future opportunities for both countries. The Indian community in Saudi Arabia is part of us, and we care for them as we do our citizens.” He added, “We are working diligently to bring the economic corridor into reality, and this project requires persistent effort.”²⁸

However, despite the importance of this corridor, particularly given the increase in trade between GCC countries and India and the ongoing negotiations to establish a free trade agreement between the two sides—which would further enhance the significance of the corridor—it faces several challenges:

²⁷ India News. 2024. "India Aims to Strengthen Maritime Security and Boost Trade Through the IMEC Initiative." September 6. Accessed November 5, 2024. <https://www.indianewsnetwork.com/ar/20240906/india-aims-to-strengthen-maritime-security-and-boost-trade-through-imec-initiative>.

²⁸ Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper Website. 2023. "Saudi Arabia and India Sign Agreements in Renewable Energy, Petrochemicals, Agriculture, and Industry." September 11. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://aawsat.com/اتفاقيات-توقعان-والهند-السعودية-4539131/الخليج/العربي-العالم>.

1. China's Growing Economic Relations with the GCC: China holds a 20% stake in the Red Sea Gateway Terminal, a Saudi company specializing in the construction, operation, and maintenance of container terminals. Additionally, non-oil trade between China and the UAE reached approximately \$72 billion in 2022.²⁹ The volume of trade between Saudi Arabia and China reached \$115.1 billion in 2025, compared with \$102 billion in 2024.³⁰

2. The Corridor's Passage through the Strait of Hormuz: As planned, the corridor will pass through the Strait of Hormuz, potentially allowing Iran to pose additional maritime security threats, similar to the current Iranian threats to maritime navigation through the Strait of Hormuz.

3. Trade and Regulatory Issues: The expectation that the corridor will reduce transit time by 40% and costs by 30% may be unrealistic. The project's success depends on improvements in global trade flows and increased demand for Indian goods in GCC markets, as well as the challenges of securing funding and reconciling the priorities of participating countries.³¹

4. India's Strategic Goals: The project seems more aligned with India's strategic objectives than with broader partnership goals. In other words, is India adopting a new global partnership strategy, including with GCC countries, or is this project part of India's strategy to manage its competition with China? India faces challenges from China's Belt and Road Initiative, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which limits India's logistical connectivity with Central Asia to the north and northwest. India also faces challenges from

²⁹ Abdul Moez Khan. 2023. "The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: Too Little, Too Late?" December 12. Accessed November 5, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2023/12/the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-imec-too-little-too-late?lang=ar>.

³⁰ "Saudi Arabia-China Trade in 2025," *Asharq Business with Bloomberg*, 2026, [Asharq Business](#).

³¹ Emirates Policy Center. 2023. "Complementary Competition: The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative." October 4. Accessed November 5, 2024. <https://epc.ae/ar/details/scenario/altanafus-altakamuli-mamar-alhind-alsharq-alawsat-uwruba-wamubadarat-alhizam-waltariq>.

Chinese ports in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, as well as from China's growing influence in the Gulf.³²

5. Security Risks in Corridor Areas: The corridor passes through regions affected by terrorism and various conflicts, including the India-Pakistan conflict, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Yemen, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These tensions could hinder the implementation of the corridor projects.³³

Obstacles to GCC–India Maritime Security Cooperation

Despite several significant indicators that could provide a strong foundation for broader future cooperation in maritime security, obstacles remain, including:

1. Differences in Perspectives on Addressing Maritime Security Threats: India and the GCC countries have differing views on how to address maritime security threats. India's role in maritime security in the Indian Ocean has become more clearly defined over the past decade. India's approach to maritime security threats is based on a "mission-based deployment" strategy, which includes the Indian Navy's role in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008 and efforts to secure maritime straits such as Bab al-Mandab and the Strait of Hormuz. This also involves regular visits by Indian ships to the six GCC countries and training missions for GCC naval personnel.³⁴ However, maritime security threats in the Arabian Gulf are persistent and require deterrent efforts, as demonstrated by both historical and current events. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Gulf oil tankers faced attacks, threatening regional maritime security. Between 1984 and 1987, there were 309 attacks on ships—187 by Iraq and 122 by Iran. The Arabian Gulf also experienced maritime security threats during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which resulted in pollution of Gulf waters, as well as during Iran's threats to close or disrupt navigation in the Strait of

³² Emirates Policy Center. 2023. "Complementary Competition: The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative." October 4. Accessed November 5, 2024. <https://epc.ae/ar/details/scenario/altanafus-altakamuli-mamar-alhind-alsharq-alawsat-uwrubawamubadarat-alhizam-waltariq>.

³³ Tawat Othman. 2023. "New Economic Corridors: Opportunities for Success, Obstacles, and Challenges." *Araa Hawl Al-Khaleej*, 35.

³⁴ Abhijit Singh. 2020. "The Development of India's Maritime Posture in the Indian Ocean: Opportunities for the Gulf Region." August. Accessed November 3, 2024. <https://www.agda.ac.ae/docs/default-source/Publications/eda-insight-aug-2020-arb-abhijit.pdf>.

Hormuz amid its nuclear dispute with the United States. More recently, Houthi attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab have posed challenges for the GCC countries, leading to the formation of U.S.-led military coalitions to maintain maritime security.³⁵ Additionally, Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz during recent developments has further highlighted the vulnerability of Gulf maritime security.

2. Differences in the Concept of the Balance of Power Between India (China) and GCC Countries (Iran): While India has the capability to balance China's influence in the Indian Ocean, there is a significant gap between the naval capabilities of GCC countries and those of Iran.³⁶ Despite Iran's and some GCC states' participation in regional organizations concerned with maritime navigation in the Indian Ocean, this has not led to consensus on maritime navigation in the Arabian Gulf. There are numerous contentious issues between Iran and GCC countries, including Iran's perspective on Gulf security and maritime navigation. For instance, establishing a maritime security code of conduct for the Arabian Gulf, like those in other regions such as West Africa and Asia, remains challenging. Although Iran signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982), the Iranian parliament has not ratified it.³⁷

3. The Presence of Other International Players in Maintaining Maritime Security: In the Indian Ocean region and within regional arrangements, the presence of other international actors adds complexity. For example, the Djibouti Code of Conduct includes international participants, as does the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. This involvement can create tensions between regional and international interests. In the Horn of Africa, there are numerous military bases belonging to both regional and global actors. A 2019 report by the Stockholm Peace Institute highlighted that the Horn of Africa, comprising Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, hosts 19 military bases operated by 16 countries at both regional and global levels. This concentration of military presence poses risks in the vicinity of the Bab al-

³⁵ Ashraf Mohammed Keshk. 2022. *Maritime Security of the Arabian Gulf States*. Manama: Bahrain Center for Strategic, International, and Energy Studies "Derasat".

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "Is Iran Legally Entitled to Impose Fees on Passage through the Strait of Hormuz?" Asharq Al-Awsat, April 16, 2026, <https://aawsat.com/?شؤون-إقليمية-٥٢٦٢٩١-هل-يحق-لإيران-قانونياً-فرض-رسوم-على-عبور-مضيق-هرمز>.

Mandab Strait, a strategic waterway, particularly in the event of conflicts between these actors.³⁸

4. Overlapping GCC Commitments between the BRI and the Strategic Corridor: GCC countries pursue a strategy of establishing balanced international partnerships and, accordingly, maintain balanced relations with both India and China.

5. GCC Security Commitments with Major Western Powers in Maritime Security: GCC countries in general, and the Kingdom of Bahrain in particular, constitute key pillars of international efforts to address maritime security threats. These efforts do not conflict with GCC countries' international partnerships; however, Western powers remain the principal actors in establishing coalitions dedicated to safeguarding maritime navigation.

6. Challenge of Natural Factors: Although there are areas for cooperation between the two sides in addressing traditional maritime security threats in the Indian Ocean region—such as piracy, armed robbery, maritime terrorism, alliances between pirates and terrorist groups, marine pollution, and human trafficking—natural factors present the greatest challenge. The Indian Ocean is affected by nearly 70% of global natural disasters, including cyclones that regularly impact coastal areas. In addition, the region's security is vulnerable to earthquakes and tsunamis.³⁹

Proposal for a "Regional Security Forum for West Asian Countries"

Given the growing significance of “regions” in the current global system and the mutual strategic understanding between the Arabian Gulf region and key countries in West Asia, particularly India, there are academic proposals to establish a regional forum for West Asian countries. By “key countries,” we refer to those with significant influence and impact within a region. India, with its growing economy, holds both regional and global influence, as do GCC countries, which share similar political, economic, social, and historical contexts. They are

³⁸ Ashraf Mohammed Keshk. 2024. "Military Competition Near International Waterways." June 18. Accessed November 9, 2024. <https://akhbar-alkhaleej.com/news/article/1370416>.

³⁹ retd)1, Rear Admiral Khaled Iqbal. n.d. Maritime Security Cooperation in Indian Ocean: Prospects and Way Ahead for IORA. Accessed November 9, 2024.

<https://bsmrmu.edu.bd/public/files/econtents/63e20a63426ba1-Maritime%20Security%20Cooperation%20in%20Indian%20Ocean%20Prospects%20.pdf>.

also united by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a regional organization established in 1981.

GCC countries, along with India, could consider establishing such a forum based on several key dimensions:

1. **Historical Dimension:** This includes the significant role played by Arab ports in Indian Ocean trade, as well as the presence of Arabs and Indians, alongside other powers, in the region throughout various historical periods to facilitate trade.
2. **Geostrategic Dimension:** The Indian Ocean is the world's third-largest ocean and is connected to numerous strategically important waterways for global trade, such as the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, the Arabian Gulf, and the Strait of Hormuz.
3. **Asian Influence:** Asian countries are playing an increasingly important role at both the regional and global levels, as are GCC countries, highlighting their shared strategic interests. Among these interests is the substantial Indian workforce in GCC countries, totaling 9 million, which generates around 65% of remittance flows to India, estimated at approximately \$89 billion.

The forum aims to promote cooperative security and enhance mutual interdependence. It would be founded on three principles: respect for borders, non-interference in internal affairs, and respect for state sovereignty; mutual benefit for all parties; and cooperation in the security field, particularly in addressing maritime security threats. This is especially important given the reliance of countries in the western Indian Ocean on maritime routes for global trade. Economic collaboration based on mutual benefits would also be essential. Key issues for the forum's agenda could include the Palestinian cause, nuclear non-proliferation, and respect for the sanctity of borders.

Conclusions:

1. While there are historical, cultural, and mutual-interest-based foundations for cooperation between India and GCC countries in the Indian Ocean region, these alone are insufficient given the region's complex dynamics.
2. There are significant indicators of Indo-GCC cooperation in maritime security over the past decade, including Indian naval visits to GCC ports, maritime agreements, and joint exercises, all of which can be further developed.
3. Despite the importance of regional security frameworks highlighted in this paper, there remains a need for a dedicated regional security organization for the countries of West Asia, with maritime security as one of its primary objectives.
4. Leveraging the resources of the Indian Ocean depends on the ability of countries to address natural disasters and the threat posed by terrorist groups that use technology to undermine maritime security.
5. While regional cooperation among Indian Ocean countries is crucial, it does not exclude the interests of major powers in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, Indian Ocean countries need to reach an agreement on how to manage the interests of these powers.

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